DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 928 CS 006 228

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TITLE The Reading of Older Americans Who View Learning as a Lifelong Activity.
SPONS AGENCY Hood Coll., Frederick, Md.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Lifelong Learning; Motivation; *Older Adults; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; *Reading Interests; *Reading Research

ABSTRACT

A study examined the reading behavior of 101 older adults enrolled in a summer "elderhostel" program offered by a small eastern college. Each subject responded to a questionnaire concerning reading habits, interests, attitudes, and motivations. Results showed that the older adults had a wide range of reading interests, including mysteries, biographies, and histories. Newspapers were the most popular reading materials, followed by magazines and books. The older adults were also found to be frequent users of libraries, with 74% citing libraries as their main source of reading materials. Reading activities occupied 2.5 hours of an average day for the subjects, while their television viewing time averaged 2.4 hours. The subjects' greatest motivations for reading were enjoyment and gathering information. Poor eyesight was not found to be a significant factor for those who did not read often. (FL)

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The Reading of Older Americans Who View Learning as a Lifelong Activity

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the reading behaviors of 101 older adults enrolled in a summer Elderhostel Program at Hood College, Frederick, Maryland. Each person completed a one-page questionnaire, answering questions related to seven original research questions. Findings concerning these persons' reading attitudes, interests, habits, and motivations are included. Comparisons are also made between findings of this study and other reports of older persons' reading. The author suggests that a positive relationship seems to exist between reading activities and these subjects' desirable philosophy of lifelong learning. Suggestions are made for the enhancement of reading activities for all elderly individuals.

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The Reading of Older Americans Who View Learning as a Lifelong Activity

In the next decades we will witness a gerontological boom. Experts predict that in the early 2000s there will be more than 36 million Americans over age 65 (Goodman, 1980). Our society is only just beginning to carefully consider this previously overlooked minority group.

Reading educators and researchers also have been lax in this oversight of the elderly. The only comprehensive publication dealing with reading and older adults is the July-September 1979 issue of Educational Gerontology, which deals with their reading interests, reading processes, teaching strategies, reading as a means of renewal or life enhancement, learning capacities, and strategies of reading. A 1980 computer search of ERIC and Dissertation Abstracts International sources located less than a dozen articles (not including those also in the special issue of Educational Gerontology) that dealt with reading and older adults. De Santi (1976) examined their reading strategies and interests, Hoar (1960) looked at general reading behaviors, and leisure-reading behaviors were reported by Wolf (1975). Romani (1973), Lovelace (1977) and Murry (1979) also dealt with reading interests. Preferred reading materials were emphasized in Moshey's (1972) report. Kingston (1977) specified selected reading topics and Mitzer (1975) compared reading abilities of persons enrolled in university courses with those not in the university. A few reports of successful reading programs for the elderly were also found in these two sources.

A recent report (Ribovich & Erickson, 1980) again emphasized the meager data base concerning the elderlys' reading behaviors and then continued by reporting on the developmental reading habits of a small group of older persons. Their findings added another insightful puzzle piece

to help us better understand the older American's reading process.

There are many facets of the elderly reader to be investigated. None of the previously cited studies examined the reading of persons who maintain the belief that learning should be an ongoing, self-motivated, lifelong activity rather than something done for credit, which essentially ceases when one leaves school. Profiles of this type of person's reading should help determine the relationship between reading and a highly desirable philosophy of learning. This information would be useful to community organizations, retirement center directors, publishers of material specifically directed toward the older reader, and libraries, as well as continuing education programs.

The purpose of this research was to answer the following questions, as they related to older persons enrolled in non-degree summer school courses on a college campus:

1. What are their attitudes about reading?
2. What are their reading interests?
3. What types of reading materials do they prefer?
4. What are their most frequent sources of reading materials?
5. How much time do they spend in daily reading activity, compared with television viewing.
6. What motivates them to read (or not read)?
7. What differences and similarities exist between this specific elderly population and other elderly groups.

METHOD

During Elderhostel Programs, colleges throughout the United States open their facilities to older citizens. These older "students" live in dorms, eat cafeteria meals, and enroll in a wide variety of one-week courses including offerings such as "Presidential Politics," "Sexuality and the Law," "Topics in Women's History," and "Consumer Problems and Protection." They also enjoy making new friends during bridge games, trips to local attractions and evening concerts. Elderhostel students typically visit more than one campus during the summer, so their time is spent traveling as well as learning.

Participants in this study were enrolled in the 1980 summer Elderhostel Program sponsored by Hood College, Frederick, Maryland. The researcher met with each of three separate groups enrolled in the program during their Sunday orientation sessions. She briefly explained the purpose of her study, and 101 of the 103 persons attending these meetings agreed to complete a one-page questionnaire. The ages of these persons ranged from 53-81, averaging 67 years. Sixty-seven percent were females and 33% were males.

Most persons completed the form in about 10 minutes. Assistance was provided in only three cases because persons couldn't write or see well. Several individuals teased the researcher about gathering data for a degree requirement, although she assured them that her doctorate was already earned. Many of the subjects expressed an interest in knowing the results, while others wanted to talk extensively about favorite books and related issues raised by the questionnaire. It was obvious that these elderly were mentally alert.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attitude

When asked to describe how they generally felt about reading, the phrase "love reading," was selected by 62% of all persons. "Like reading" was chosen by 36%, while "no feelings" was the choice of only two percent. No one indicated a moderately or strongly negative attitude. Several people said they thought this question was absurd. As one man said, "Of course I like to read! I grew up reading anything I could get my hands on, just because I enjoyed it so much..... always did and still do. I just can't understand why some folks don't like to read."

In a previous study by this researcher (Ngandu & O'Rourke, in press), elderly Lincoln, Nebraska residents of a more heterogeneous background were asked the same question. Their responses indicated positive, but less intense feelings as 32% responded they "loved reading," and 55% stated they "liked reading." Ten percent of that group had "no feelings" and three percent "disliked reading." It is clear that the lifelong learners maintained a more positive attitude about reading.

Reading Interests

A wide variety of reading interests were reflected in this group's identification of many different topics. Several areas emerged as favorites: mystery (identified by 36% of the subjects); news and world affairs (32%); autobiographies and biographies (28%); history (24%); romance (19%); general fiction (18%); religion (16%); and historical fiction (13%). To a lesser extent business and finance interested eight percent of the group. Three percent preferred psychology, science, or technical material, while two percent listed topics including classics, crafts, law, plays, science fiction, sociology, and travel. Only one

percent mentioned the topics of animals, cooking, critical reviews of art and prose, detective stories, essays, homemaking, jokes, medicine, philosophy, plants, or poetry.

This group's high interest in mystery, history, biography and romance is similar to findings of Romani (1973) and Kingston's (1977) review of studies. With the exception of Ribovich and Erickson's study (1980), other research does not indicate such a high interest in news and world affairs. The Elderhostel group also exhibited a greater range of interests than is reported in most other studies.

Harvey and Dutton's (1979) extensive review of reading interests indicated that many older person's interests were limited by two factors: 1) the importance of nonconfusing materials and 2) few characters in the materials. These considerations were never mentioned by the Elderhostel group.

Popular Reading Materials

Newspapers were the most often read materials, as 88% of the subjects indicated they usually read this type of literature. Also quite popular were magazines (80%) and books (78%). To a much lesser extent 33% indicated they frequently read short pamphlets, while 25% said that other materials, such as mail advertisements and letters were also read.

In the previously mentioned study by Ngandu and O'Rourke (in press), this same question was asked. The Nebraska group also indicated that newspapers were their most popular source (76%). Magazines were their second choice (63%), but their third choice, books (38%), was rated much lower than the Elderhostel's rating. Several of the Nebraska subjects stated that they preferred shorter selections, but this was not the case

with the Elderhostel participants. A conversation with one gentleman indicated that he could "get into more depth with a book compared to a magazine article." It seemed that some of their diverse reading interests were best accommodated by books rather than by newspapers or magazines. As is indicated in the next section, this group's heavy use of the library additionally reflects their frequent reading of books. Moshey's (1972) study did find that a large percentage of a group of retired upper-middle class professionals read books, but her subjects were more similar to the Elderhostel group than to the Nebraska group.

Sources of Reading Materials

When asked to identify their main sources of reading materials, they named the library most often (74% of all persons supplied this source). This group's ease of mobility certainly influenced their use of the library. The next most indicated source was subscriptions (73%). To a much lesser extent 32% purchased materials at bookstores. One lady said she would "like to buy more books, but they're just too expensive." She found it more economical to borrow from the library or friends. Newsstands and friends were each cited by 29% of the group. Family members provided 12% of the sources, and the church was a main source for 11% of the group. Bookmobiles were mentioned by only four percent of the cases, while the least used source was senior centers (2%).

Time Spend Reading vs. Watching Television

Reading activities occupied an average of 2.5 hours per day, although the group's range varied from 0 - 7.5 hours. This amount of reading time is considerably greater than the average of 89 minutes per day found by Sharon (1973-74) for adults over the age of 60. Mikulecky's (1978) report of 2.7 hours per day for middle-aged adults included their leisure reading

as well as required, job related reading. Most of the Elderhostel group were retired, so they were not concerned with job required reading. This indicated they did more leisure reading than middle-aged adults did.

The subjects were asked how much time they watched television, to determine which activity was more valued. Television time averaged 2.4 hours, almost the same as reading time. The range for television viewing was less, though, as persons indicated watching TV 0 - 5 hours per day.

Motivations for Reading or Not Reading

When asked why they read, the Elderhostel population indicated two main reasons. Sixty-six percent stated that they enjoyed reading or found it entertaining. Sixty-five percent said they read to be informed or to learn new things. In several cases their answers indicated that it was not possible to separate the enjoyment factor from the learning factor: "I enjoy learning about new things"; "I like to keep up to date on what's happening in the world." The only three other reasons given for reading included reading to pass the time (5%), to relax (4%), and to escape from problems (2%). Ngandu and O'Rourke's (in press) Nebraska study found that only 23% of the group said they read for entertainment while another 23% read for information. Almost the same amount read to pass time (20%), and several others gave passive reasons including having no one to talk with or not owning a television set to watch.

Only three percent of the Elderhostel group said they avoided reading because of a lack of time, while two percent had eye difficulties that restricted their reading time. Most other studies dealing with this issue found that eye difficulties impaired reading abilities for a substantially higher percentage of persons.

CONCLUSIONS

The main differences between the reading attitudes, interests, behaviors and motivations of these lifelong learners attending the Elderhostel program and other populations in previously cited studies included their 1) more highly positive attitude; 2) very extensive diversity of reading interests including a keen interest in news and world affairs; 3) heightened reading of books; 4) frequent use of the library; 5) greater amount of time spent in daily reading; 6) stronger emphasis on reading for enjoyment and for information; and 7) little difficulty with eyesight. Similarities with other elderly groups included 1) a generally positive reading attitude; 2) reading interests which included mystery, biographies, history and romance, 3) a preference for reading newspapers, 4) a heavy reliance on subscription reading materials, and 5) a general motivation to read for enjoyment and information.

Studies by Wilson (1979) and Lovelace (1977) found that older persons experienced social and mental benefits by participating in reading activities. The Elderhostel group, which was already involved in extensive and varied reading experiences, definitely demonstrated positive mental and social characteristics also. The corelation between reading and positive results appears to be strong.

The reading activities of the elderly must be encouraged. These activities can be supported in several sites such as retirement centers, nursing homes, senior centers, or church organizations, as group reading and book sharing sessions are provided to enhance the elderlys' lives. Libraries usually sponsor several book activities for children, but sessions for older adults are minimal. Even a once-a-month book

discussion group should be welcomed by these citizens. Another logical place for exchanging information about books could be in elementary schools. Our senior generation could model positive reading attitudes as well as discuss reading interests with children.

It seems logical that a booksharing course would be an excellent addition to Elderhostel course offerings, too. Participants could talk about interesting and enjoyable books with their peers, as well as read and critique specific articles. Other possibilities for the course might include interaction with a local author, as well as a mini-workshop on writing and publishing one's own work.

There are many other reading aspects of the elderly, lifelong learner to be investigated. What, for example, causes them to feel so positively about reading? Why do they want to continue learning through reading? Answers to these questions may help us facilitate similar positive views about reading among other elderly populations, in order to help make retirement years more fulfilling.

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